Chapter X

Access to the Living Room: Triple Play and Interactive Television
Reshaping the Producer/Consumer Relation

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Abstract

Whereas the advent of interactive TV has been discussed as one of the key added values of digitization and convergence of “old” and “new media” for years, current marketing strategies of the big players in the Dutch telecommunications market avoid the term interactivity. Providers promise users “more fun” and increased ease of media consumption when connected digitally to the media world by offering broadband Internet, cable television, and telephone services in one package. They aim at another added quality of interactive media consumption: gaining access to the living room means gaining access to consumption patterns that can be traced back to the individual consumer. This article discusses media convergence and the current development of interactive television in the context of the reconfiguration of the relation between producers and consumers in the new online economy.
For almost three decades, one magic word has dominated professional and public debates on the future of television: *interactivity*. The story goes that when finally provided with a return channel, our “good old television” would become a true means of real two-way-communication. Viewers would not only compose their own program schedules, watch any program at any time, get more background information, and do their shopping at home, they would also contribute to and participate in programs and would even become directors themselves. Although the first field tests of interactive television services in the U.S. in the 1970s, then still based on analogous technologies, failed (Richeri, 2004), and although audience research in the early 1990s still showed that the average public was not ready for interactive television programming (Berghaus, 1995), the industry’s expectations remained optimistic, especially since the introduction of the Internet in the early 1990s; progress in digitization and compression of audiovisual information; and household’s fast growing computer and broadband penetration. The convergence of television and computer-based communication technologies would help to finally disseminate the envisioned interactive television or multimedia system (Owen, 1999; Van Vliet, 2002).

This vision of the industry was echoed by a new brand of media theory that in the name of technological potentials of new media uncritically promoted a fundamental transformation of traditional power relations that were inherent to “old-fashioned” broadcast media and their traditional forms of mass communication. For example, Pearce (1997) praised this “interactive revolution” in a McLuhanian style:

*The interactive revolution is [...] about creating machines that extend our mental and creative faculties, that enable us to store, manage, and most important, share massive amounts of knowledge on a global level. It is about using powerful tools to create our own educational and entertainment experiences rather than passively accepting that which is fed to us by so-called experts. It is about the dissolution of boundaries and the translation of all thought into a common vocabulary. Binary code is the digital Esperanto that is leading concurrently to individual empowerment and worldwide unity.* (p. xvii)

According to this view, the New Media technologies would fundamentally transform the relation between producers and consumers. Through interactive media, consumers would increasingly gain control of the means of production and distribution, contribute to public opinion, and participate in cultural production.
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